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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANILA 001595

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SUBJECT: LATEST KILLING OF JOURNALIST SPARKS OUTRAGE

REF: A. MANILA 1151

[1](#)B. MANILA 0312

[1](#)C. 04 MANILA 5775

[1](#)D. 04 MANILA 5220

Classified By: Political Officer Timothy L. Cipullo
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (U) Summary: The shooting of a well-known journalist in Mindanao on March 24 marked what media organizations say is the fourth of a journalist this year and has sparked new public outrage. The House of Representatives plans a hearing and the Catholic Church has condemned the attack. The Philippine National Police (PNP) announced that "Task Force Newsmen," a group within the PNP focused on investigating killings of journalists, is actively investigating this and other cases. Local police have filed charges against the suspected killer, but have not yet made an arrest. Journalist organizations are focused on further raising public awareness of journalist killings and educating their members to minimize the chances of becoming a target. The latest killing again highlights how dangerous the profession of journalism is in the Philippines. Mission has underscored to the GRP the need for a firm clampdown on the perpetrators of the attacks. End Summary.

Latest Killing

[1](#)2. (U) On March 24, Marlyne Esperat died when an assailant shot her in her home in Tacurong City, Sultan Kudarat, southern Mindanao. Esperat's killing is the fourth of a journalist this year, according to media organizations, although the police say it is the second (see para 6). There were 10 such killings last year. Esperat, a well-known columnist with the weekly newspaper "Midland Review," was known as a fierce anti-corruption crusader. She had filed several graft cases against local and national government officials, as well as against a police chief who may have been implicated in her murder (see para 4).

Condemnation from many Sectors

[1](#)3. (U) The Esperat killing sparked fresh outrage. The Committee on Human Rights in the House of Representatives plans an inquiry into Esperat's murder when the House reconvenes on April 11. Committee Chairperson Rep. Loretta Ann Rosales urged police to arrest Esperat's killers and exhorted those with information about the killing to cooperate with investigators. Rosales told the "Manila Standard" that "the job of journalists is indispensable in the delivery of information to the public and in the search for truth. It is absolutely wrong to kill them as retaliation for their work." The Catholic Church also strongly condemned the killing. Archbishop of Lingayan Oscar Cruz issued a scathing commentary on the Catholic Bishop's Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) website, declaring that the Philippines has become a "dangerous country," as he called on the GRP to take firm steps to apprehend the perpetrators of the attacks.

PNP Investigation Turns up -- Jack

[1](#)4. (C) New Director General of the Philippine National Police Arturo C. Lomibao assured Pol/C on April 6 that the PNP was actively investigating this and other journalist cases, and noted that he had personally been in touch with the victim's family. He said that he believed local police had identified two suspects by description and had filed charges against the actual killer by name on April 5 or 6. Separately, Senior PNP Superintendent Frederick Oconer told poloff that the PNP is closely examining reports that the chief of police of General Santos City, Senior Superintendent Willie Dangane (a National Food Authority contractor and a former politician), was involved in the murder. Esperat had filed an obstruction of justice case involving allegations of graft against Superintendent Dangane, which was still pending

at the time of her murder. The PNP has already relieved Dangané of his post and placed him on "floating" status, pending the outcome of the investigation. One of Oconer's subordinates confirmed to poloff on April 6 that local authorities had filed charges against one suspect on April 5, but had not yet made any arrest. However, police had so far only identified the suspect -- the alleged triggerman -- by the alias "Jack." He could not confirm whether the police had established any links between the suspect and Dangané.

15. (C) Oconer confirmed that "Task Force Newsmen" is leading the GRP's investigation of Esperat's murder, as well as the investigations into the other killings. The President formed the Task Force from within the Criminal Investigation and Detection Group (CIDG) of the PNP on July 22, 2004. Of the 58 cases involving the murders of journalists since 1986, authorities have filed charges in 29 cases, according to the latest Task Force report. Three cases have been dismissed due to lack of evidence and 21 cases are still under trial. Oconer also noted that five people have been convicted of killing journalists since 1986, with the last conviction occurring in 1999. Journalist watchdog groups claim that only two people have been convicted.

16. (C) According to Oconer, police have made no arrests in the other cases of journalist killings this year, in large part due to a lack of witnesses. Task Force Newsmen puts the number of killings of journalists at only two for 2005, asserting that two other killings cited by journalist watchdog groups were not work-related. Many potential witnesses are often afraid to testify for fear of retaliation by the killers, he added. The PNP, working with other GRP agencies, has tried to protect witnesses, but Oconer admitted that the GRP has had great difficulty doing so. (Comment: The concerns of potential witnesses were no doubt reinforced recently when gunmen killed Edgar Amoro, a schoolteacher and freelance broadcaster who was a key witness to the 2002 killing of journalist Edgar Demalerio. Amoro became the second witness to the Demalerio murder to be killed, despite the fact that he was in a witness protection program run by the Department of Justice. End comment)

Journalists React

17. (SBU) In reaction to the spate of killings, professional journalist organizations have been striving to raise public awareness in order to put more pressure on the GRP to bring perpetrators to justice. This latest killing has garnered more attention than previous murders, in large part because of Esperat's flamboyant style and reputation as an aggressive whistleblower. The Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism prepared a sympathetic feature on the life of Esperat, which many news outlets carried.

18. (C) Press organizations such as the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP) are also trying to work closely with authorities. Carlos Conde, Secretary General of NUJP and the local stringer for "The New York Times," told poloff that the PNP had invited NUJP to join the investigation into the Esperat killing and that NUJP had agreed to help where it could. Some press organizations are also taking matters into their own hands. The Freedom Fund for Filipino Journalists (FFFJ) has published a guidebook titled "Staying Alive" that offers advice to journalists on how not to become a target and how to survive violent attacks. Additionally, after the killing of the second witness to the Demalerio murder, the FFFJ moved the third (and last remaining living) witness to a hiding place in Manila from his home in Pagadian City in Mindanao. The FFFJ also relocated the wives of Amoro and Demalerio for their protection.

19. (C) Mission contacts have admitted that journalists in the Philippines frequently make powerful enemies (and thus become potential targets) by practicing "envelope" journalism, i.e., writing articles with a certain slant in exchange for money. It is difficult to quantify the prevalence of envelope journalism, but many believe it widespread in the coverage of local and national politics. Many journalists reportedly cast a blind eye to the practice in order to "protect" their colleagues. Mission is actively working with the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ), the Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility (CMFR), and university-based institutions to conduct training programs for journalists with the aim of increasing professionalization and at least to discourage corrupt practices. Missionoffs have also underscored to the GRP the need for a firm clampdown on the perpetrators of the attacks, and continue to work on many fronts to raise respect for the rule of law via targeted diplomatic and assistance-related efforts.

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